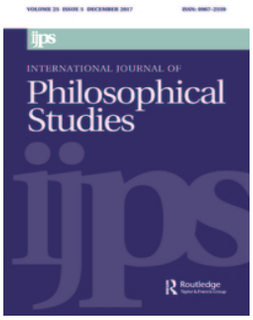

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Parental Choices and the Prospect of Regret: An Alternative Account

Katrien Schaubroeck and Kristien Hens

Department of Philosophy, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

ABSTRACT

Is the question 'will you regret it if you do (not do) this?' helpful when people face difficult life decisions, such as terminating a pregnancy if a disability is detected or deciding to become a parent? Despite the commonness of the question in daily life, several philosophers have argued lately against its usefulness. We reconstruct four arguments from recent literature on regret, transformative experience and the use of imagination in deliberation. After analysis of these arguments we conclude that the prospect of regret remains a useful deliberative heuristic, provided four conditions are fulfilled. If the prospect of (the absence of) regret is arrived at via reflection on one's values, in a non-coercive context, when well-informed about factual circumstances, and in a process of self-commitment, the question of what one will regret is a helpful device to get in touch with one's deepest concerns that give reasons to act in a particular way.

KEYWORDS Regret; abortion; transformative experience; imagination; R. Jay Wallace; L.A. Paul

1. Introduction

Imagine a 38-year-old woman experiencing an existential crisis, because she does not know whether she wants a child or not. If she postpones the decision much longer, nature will decide for her. A good friend listens to her doubts and tries to help, asking: 'If you imagine yourself in five years, do you think it likely you will regret motherhood?'

Imagine another woman, already pregnant for 12 weeks, having received a positive result to the Non-Invasive Prenatal Test (NIPT). The foetus she carries has trisomy-21: her child will be born with Down syndrome. She and her partner have to make a decision urgently about the pregnancy: abortion is legal in the country they live in, but it has to be done soon. Imagine the couple

CONTACT Katrien Schaubroeck katrien.schaubroeck@uantwerpen.be

discussing the options and asking themselves: 'Will we regret the abortion, or rather will we regret keeping the baby?'

These imaginary dilemma-cases and the methods deployed do not seem far-fetched. Imagining whether one will regret something is a deliberative heuristic that is very common. Even very small, daily decisions, like whether one should go and see a movie or rather grade a student's paper, are often made on the basis of the prospect of regret. It is likely that there are individual differences as to how often one invokes this heuristic, depending, among other things, on how hard one finds it to make decisions. But still, it does not strike most people as a strange or useless tool. Yet philosophers and ethicists tend to disagree. In bio-ethics, for example, the role of regret is remarkably absent from theoretical reflection on decisions in the context of prenatal testing. Bio-ethicists have often assumed that decisions about whether to end a pregnancy or not are best taken using general principles, such as the intrinsic value of a foetus at a certain gestational age, or considerations about the well-being of the future child, or even the relative cost of raising disabled children for society. The discussion is mostly about whether there are consequences for the offspring, rather than about the relevant desires and wishes of those involved in the decision-making. Hence, the prospect of regret is evidently overlooked as a relevant factor to take into account. It is true that the principle of reproductive autonomy is often invoked, which states that it is up to the pregnant mother to decide whether to continue a pregnancy or not. But *how* she should decide, let alone which emotions and desires and concerns should inform the deliberation, is rarely discussed in bio-ethics.

Recent theories about emotions and deliberation in *moral psychology* do not so much overlook as negatively value the role of regret. The value of regret has been doubted and the deliberative usefulness of the prospect of regret has been questioned from several perspectives. In this article, we will cover four recently developed philosophical objections against the use of regret as a deliberative tool. After discussing and evaluating these objections by testing them on the two case studies described above, we will describe the conditions under which we think the prospect of regret is a useful and rational tool in deliberation after all.

2. Four Arguments Against the Deliberative Value of (the Prospect of) Regret

Philosophers thinking about the deliberative value of regret have come from different philosophical sub-disciplines. One of the most well-known discussions on regret of recent years has been instigated by R. Jay Wallace's (2013) book *The View from Here: On Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret* in which he takes issue with Bernard Williams' argument from 'Moral Luck'. As we will explain, Wallace's main, important contribution to discussions on regret is his claim that regret does not track justification in the way Williams thought. Another well-known recent book that bears on the discussion on regret is *Transformative Experience* by L. A.

Paul (2015a). She approaches the topic from a more general and existentialist angle than Wallace, arguing that many decisions in life cannot be made *rationally*. The concept of a transformative experience is much discussed within analytic philosophy, but the implications for the deliberative value of regret have not been drawn out in the way we will do here. In addition to these two positions, we will summarize arguments formulated by Kate Greasly, a bio-ethicist working on abortion, and Bence Nanay, a philosopher of mind studying the processes that underlie imagination and deliberation. Drawing on their reflections we will identify and describe the irrelevance-argument, the manipulation-argument, the inaccessibility-argument and the misleading-argument in the rest of this section.

2.1. The Irrelevance-Argument

In *The View from Here* Wallace argues that regret and justification do not track each other in the way that Williams' argument from 'Moral Luck' supposes. Central to Williams' argument is the fictionalized character of the mature Gauguin, who looks back at his decision to abandon his family in order to travel to Tahiti. His success as a painter makes it impossible for Gauguin to regret the decision, and what is more, according to Williams, the success also justifies retrospectively the decision he took. Wallace criticizes Williams for mixing up two different things: the inability to regret a decision and the decision being justified. He illustrates the difference with another classic example from the philosophical literature: the 14-year-old girl who decides to have a child. Originally featuring in Derek Parfit's (1983, 358) *Reasons and Persons*, in the context of the non-identity problem, Wallace focuses on the discrepancy between two things we want to say about this case. On the one hand, the birth of the child calls for an attitude of affirmation that makes regret inappropriate. On the other hand, there are weighty considerations against the girl's decision to become pregnant, which remain cogent even after the child is born. This is also true from the girl's internal standpoint: after having given birth to a child, she is bound to affirm the child's existence, and thus unable to wish that it had not been born. This implies that she cannot regret her decision upon Wallace's (uncontroversial and accepted) understanding of regret as an on balance wish that one had not done what one did. As the girl is glad that the child is around (i.e. that she gave birth to it), she cannot both wish that the child was there and that she had not conceived at that particular point in time. And yet, it is psychologically and conceptually possible that, while affirming her child's existence, the girl recognizes that she made a wrong decision.

There is no puzzle here according to Wallace, since the inability to regret an earlier occurrence does not amount to retrospective justification or endorsement. The key lies in the phenomenon of attachments. The affirmation receives its validity *not* from reasons for the decision that would somehow, over time, be rehabilitated, *but rather* from the attachments that define the mother's

retrospective point of view and that came about as a result of the supposedly ill-conceived decision. The attachment to the child makes the girl immune to regret but the reasons of attachment that apply to the mother when she looks back are different from the moral and prudential reasons that apply to the young girl deliberating about whether to become pregnant. Thus, the discrepancy between the inability to regret and the recognition that the decision was wrong makes sense on the view that there is a discrepancy between the value in present attachments and the rational justification of past decisions. As Wallace writes:

> The basic idea I defend is that the girl had good reason not to become a mother when she faced the decision about whether to conceive, but that she later has good reason to affirm the decision that she made, insofar as she is now attached to the child to whom she gave birth. (2013, 5)

Gauguin's inability to regret his decision to abandon his family can also be explained in terms of attachments: Gauguin enjoyed a meaningful life, and became attached to his artistic project. Wallace concedes that attachments may make it impossible to regret a decision (to parent a child; to embark on an artistic project incompatible with family life), but against Williams he insists that the perspectival inability to regret an earlier decision on account of psychological pressures inherent in one's later point of view does not amount to an *ex post facto* justification.

Applying Wallace's argument to our two case studies, we should first note that Wallace does not focus on *the prospect* of regret as an aspect of deliberation. Rather, he focuses on regret as a backward-looking emotion. However, we think that his argument commits him to saying that the prospect of regret has no deliberative use. Since the inability to regret a decision does not justify the decision, the prospect of the impossibility to regret a particular choice should not be interpreted as evidence that one makes the right choice. The reasons of attachment that will be brought about by giving birth to a child, including one with Down syndrome, do not apply to the deliberative stance from which one needs to make a justified decision. Wallace would say that our suggested heuristic tool yields justification too easily. Since it is psychologically very unlikely that one will regret the existence of a child, bringing it into existence would be almost always justified if regret and justification would track each other like Williams thinks. If proactive affirmation yielded justification, it would be far too easy to let oneself off the hook and to stop the deliberation process prematurely. Thus, following his analysis of the deliberative situations of the 14-year-old girl and Gauguin, Wallace considers the prospect of being unable to regret a decision to be irrelevant to the justification of that decision, and, we suggest, would advise against the use of the heuristic device we described in our two case studies.

2.2. The Manipulation-Argument

Kate Greasly strongly relies on Wallace's argumentation in her objection against the use of regret in deliberations about whether or not to have an abortion. She agrees with Wallace that regret over abortion-decisions is often encouraged by factors other than the moral justification of the decision or its effect on women's welfare. Going beyond Wallace, she explains regret, if it does occur, by reference to social pressure. On her line of thinking, 'using the possibility or likelihood of regret to deter women from abortion is rationally unfounded at best, and at worst, emotionally manipulative' (Greasly 2012, 711).

To corroborate this claim, she cites Prolife Advocates who assert that 'while many women regret having their abortions, few regret having their babies' (quoted by Greasley 2012, 705). Greasly rebuts their argument, first by citing numbers that suggest otherwise, and second by giving an explanation of the regret that does not bear on the reasons for (not) having an abortion. In other words, even if it is true that not having an abortion causes regret less often than having one, it does not follow that having an abortion is, overall, less justified. It can still be the best option. A far more plausible explanation for the asymmetry, according to Greasly, has to take into account the duty to embrace motherhood. Regret over motherhood becomes inappropriate once a child is born, she thinks, and so a mother has 'an important reason not to embrace that attitude [of regret] emanating from her maternal duties' (Greasley 2012, 709). There is no parallel duty for women who terminate their pregnancies: 'women who choose to terminate pregnancies are under no such parallel duty to celebrate and affirm their decision in retrospect' (2012, 709). In other words, as there are fewer psychological or ethical barriers, in the form of an existing child, to adopt an attitude of regret, it is unsurprising that they do adopt it more often than the alternative group. However, that there are no such barriers for them to feel regret does not imply that they have reason to regret. It only explains why it is psychologically more likely that they will feel regret. Note that Greasly goes further than Wallace in holding that mothers have a 'duty to celebrate and affirm their decision [to have a child] in retrospect', while Wallace only speaks about the *psychological* likelihood of a mother affirming her child's existence. Secondly, about the alternative group, the women who chose an abortion, Wallace does not say anything. Indeed, his argument is limited to the claim that the inability to regret a decision does not justify the decision. He does not commit himself explicitly to the reverse claim that regretting a decision does not undermine justification for the decision. But it seems tempting and reasonable to defend both claims together. For Greasly, the feeling of regret is as irrelevant to the justification of a decision as the inability to feel regret. Hence, she argues that bringing in the possibility of regret in a deliberation process, is not helpful and might even be manipulative. Reminding women of the fact (if it is one) that there is a statistically high chance they will regret the abortion

later, is misleading since nothing follows from this fact about what would be the best choice. It is manipulative insofar as it is used to push women in a direction that society, or the person speaking to the women, approves of. What would be really helpful is helping women to make an abstraction of what 'the public thinks' and get in touch with what they themselves want.

2.3. The Inaccessibility-Argument

The notion of a 'transformative experience' has received a lot of attention since Paul presented it as a challenge to a standard view of rational deliberation. On this standard view, a rational agent makes choices by considering the options available to her and evaluating each option by assigning it a subjective value, based upon a mental model of what the outcome would be like for her/him to experience. The problem with this standard view, according to Paul, is that it overlooks the transformative nature of certain choices, most notably life choices. She explains how life-changing events, like giving birth to a first child or giving birth to a child with Down syndrome, are transformative experiences both in an epistemic and personal sense. An experience is epistemically transformative when it is simply impossible to know what the outcome of the decision will be like to experience, without having lived through the experience itself. Life-changing experiences are also personally transformative, which means that one's future preferences concerning the outcome may change dramatically as a result of the experience itself.

To illustrate the double problem with transformative decision-making, Paul describes the case of becoming a vampire. How should one decide whether one wants to become a vampire, knowing that vampires have entirely different experiences to us? One cannot know what it is like to become a vampire until actually doing so. And when one undergoes the experience, it will change one's core preferences, which in turn affects how one feels about the decision itself. Thus, one cannot possibly imagine, let alone know, what it would be like to be a vampire. Nor can one know what one would be missing if one did not. Paul (2015b, 764) concludes: 'So you can't rationally choose to do it, but nor can you rationally choose to avoid it'.

The argument carries over to the real-life example of choosing to have one's first child. Paul considers becoming a parent as a paradigmatic example of a transformative experience. As you do not know what it is like to parent a child, you cannot possibly assess whether you will appreciate the outcomes of your choice. Moreover, the experience of being a parent will alter you so deeply that it will alter your personal preferences, and thus the future agent that will do the appreciating. Although the prospect of regret does not feature as a separate deliberative tool in her reasoning, Paul is bound to believe that relying on possible future regret makes no sense in our two case studies: one does not have the necessary knowledge about what being a parent, or being parent of

a child with Down syndrome, is like, nor does one know whether one will be a person that regrets the decision after having taken it. For Paul, there are no rational or emotional grounds on which to base a choice that will result in a transformative experience. Paul advises to look at life as a matter of discovery, rather than a rationally executed plan. Pondering over potential regret is useless at best, as future regret over life-changing decisions is unimaginable, the future being inaccessible.[1]

2.4. The Misleading-Argument

Bence Nanay acknowledges that people do rely on their imagination in decision-making processes. Hence, he could concede that imagining whether one would regret something is indeed a heuristic that people use. However, he also states that this almost never yields optimal results, as imagination is extremely sensitive to irrelevant influences, and hence is an unreliable guide for decision-making. In his paper 'The Role of Imagination in Decision-Making' he cites psychological studies documenting order effect, framing effects, environmental effects like the dirtiness of one's hands and similar effects on decision-making (Nanay 2016, 130). Nanay argues that idealized-deliberation models (like the belief–desire model) cannot explain these empirical findings because they do not reflect how people *actually* deliberate. In real life, people do not compare the probability of the satisfaction of a desire given one's background beliefs. Instead, when making decisions about the future, they use their imagination. Nanay distinguishes three distinct roles imagination plays in the decision-making process: 'you *imagine* the person you *imagine* yourself to be in a situation you *imagine* to be the outcome of your decision'. After analysing how imagination in deliberation works, he states: 'As none of these three episodes of imagination can be considered reliable, decision-making is extremely unlikely to yield the optimal outcome reliably' (2016, 135, 136).

Nanay seems to take it as a given that decision-making rarely yields the optimal outcome. His project is to develop a decision-making model that is able to explain this fact (if it is one). He confidently writes:

> It is important to emphasize that I am not claiming that we never make optimal decisions. We very often do, especially when it is about some decision-problem that concerns the near future, or one we encounter often – for example, where to go to get a decent cup of coffee in the neighborhood. But we have no reason to think that our decisions in general, and especially decisions that really matter to us, have much of a chance at yielding the optimal outcome. (Nanay 2016, 136–137)

He does not conceptualize the notion of an optimal outcome or describe his notion of a rational decision. He invokes psychological findings that illustrate the sensitivity of imagination to factors that are irrelevant with regard to the facts one has to decide about, and he infers that, given our reliance on

imagination, decision-making processes are unlikely to yield the optimal outcome. Thus, imagining whether one will regret motherhood, or parenting a child with Down syndrome, must be discarded by Nanay as a misleading tool in the search for a rational decision – despite the fact that people actually *will* use it, and despite the fact that Nanay does not mention a realistic alternative decision strategy.

3. Against the Arguments Against the Deliberative Value of Regret

Having summarized four objections against the use of (the prospect of) regret in deliberation, we will now evaluate them. Specifically, we shall challenge their dismissal of regret, but acknowledge their value in drawing attention to certain pitfalls concerning the deliberative use of regret.

3.1. Against the Irrelevance-Argument

According to Wallace's distinction between the inability to regret a decision and the decision being justified, the prospect of being unable to regret a decision is not a good reason to make it. Wallace is right that psychological phenomena (about what someone regrets or does not regret) have no justificatory force in themselves, but we believe that psychological phenomena may reveal justifying facts. Being unable to regret a choice points towards a reason or value that provides the real normative support for a choice. In the same way, the prospect of (the absence of) regret does not in itself suffice to justify a decision, but this prospect may reveal reasons that, in their turn, do justify the decision. Both the case of the teenage mother and of Gauguin can be interpreted along these lines, whereby we do not need to conflate psychological constraints with justificatory bounds but rather interpret psychology as a marker of justificatory facts. Let us first give our alternative interpretation of the Gauguin case before turning to the teenage mother, which is closer to our own two case studies.

On Wallace's reading, Williams starts from Gauguin's psychological inability to regret his earlier decision and reasons that *thereby* the decision acquires retrospective justification. His interpretation strongly relies on Williams' (1981, 36) claim that, 'his [Gauguin's] decision was justified, for him, by his success'. Wallace resists a more charitable reading, according to which Williams does not derive normative conclusions from psychological premises. On our reading of Williams' argument, what justifies Gauguin's decision is not the *ex post facto* inability to regret, but rather Gauguin's ground project to become a successful, accomplished artist. Only time could tell whether this ground project would be realized and could carry the normative weight it was supposed to carry. Gauguin would not have been able to affirm his life and the necessary historical conditions such as the decision to leave Paris and decamp for Tahiti, if it turned

out that he was unable to produce innovative, high-value art works. In that case 'the project which generated the decision is revealed as an empty thing, incapable of grounding the agent's life' (Williams 1981, 36). When he succeeds, the decision is, in a sense, justified retrospectively. But the important thought here is that, for Williams, only from the retrospective point of view does it become clear that the decision to leave for Tahiti was justified, which means: backed up by real reasons – not apparent reasons.[2] We don't think that Williams meant to say, nor would we want to endorse it if he did mean this, that the immunity to regret was *in itself* the justifying ground of Gauguin's cruel decision.

The next lengthy quote from *The View from Here* enables us to show what Wallace overlooks in the case of the teenage mother. He writes:

> Even before giving birth to her daughter, the young girl had good reason to expect that both she and her child would have powerful grounds for affirming retrospectively a decision she might make to become pregnant. The fact that this outcome could be anticipated in advance, however, hardly suffices to undermine the weighty moral and prudential objections to having a child at that stage of life. It is not the kind of consideration that is capable of playing this role, and so we are not even tempted to think that the presence of these factors affects the truth of claims about what the young girl ought to have done. (Wallace 2013, 106)

However, this is not an accurate or fair description of the girl's deliberative situation. It is not the prospect of retrospective affirmation that in itself motivates the girl to become pregnant. Rather, it is the expectance that a meaningful relationship with someone will arise, an attachment that, as an unintended consequence, will also ground retrospective affirmation. As we conceded in the Gauguin case, immunity to regret does not directly yield a retrospective justification. Likewise, the prospect of justifiable immunity to regret does not in itself change an agent's deliberative situation. But the focus on the attitudes of regret and affirmation diverts the attention from *the grounds* for regret and affirmation in the case of the teenage mother, namely attachments. And it seems to us that the prospect of a meaningful attachment, or the deep human desire to create such attachments, might very well be a justifying reason for doing what it takes to sustain or create these attachments. Accordingly, in our alternative reading of the deliberating teenage mother, reflection on the possibility of regret does have deliberative value because it can help her become aware of (possibly conflicting) deep desires. When you sincerely think that you will be unable to regret motherhood (under the right circumstances, such as after freeing oneself of social pressure, as we will explain below), this reveals a value that matters deeply to you. In that sense, the prospect of regret can matter deliberatively, precisely because the prospect of attachment or another valuable experience which will make it impossible to regret the decision, can be a reason feeding into the deliberation.

Wallace recognizes the importance of having meaningful attachments in life, but in his book he limits the normative weight of them to the retrospective

point of view. However, the prospect of a valuable attachment can perfectly well count as a reason in favour of a decision that will bring the attachment about. In fact, that seems to be exactly the reason for many people to have children: they look forward to experiencing the special relationship that they will have with their children. We should note here that people have many, sometimes conflicting, deep desires. The prospect that one will be unable to regret parenthood should, therefore, not be thought of as the only decisive factor. We think it is perfectly possible to acknowledge that you probably will be unable to regret motherhood, and still decide to not have a child at that moment in your life, or ever (because you also long for other things in life that are incompatible with parenthood and which you think you would regret missing out on). But we do think that a deliberative process that takes into account the possibility of future regret, and the lesson it can teach the decision-maker about her own values, is more informed than one that does not take into account future emotions. If we are right in thinking that Wallace's account of the irrelevance of (the absence of) retrospective regret with regard to the justification of decision also implies that the prospect of regret as a decision-making tool is irrelevant, we suggest that he is wrong: discarding the attitude of regret as normatively irrelevant is not entirely justified.

Summing up, we grant Wallace that the prospect of being unable to regret a decision is not in itself a good reason in favour of the decision just as the wish to avoid the unpleasant feeling of regret is not in itself a good reason to avoid doing something. However, it is important to regard regret as a second-order phenomenon supervening on a reason against a particular course of action. Thus, when people justify their decision by saying they will regret it if they do not do it (or the other way around), they refer to regret as a shorthand for an underlying reason that counts in favour of the decision and that would be frustrated if the action remains undone. In this capacity, regret and the prospect of regret play a truly informative role in deliberation, insofar as it can reveal or disclose relevant reasons or values relevant for the decision under deliberation.

3.2. Against the Manipulation-Argument

Greasly draws attention to a causal factor in the generation of regret that is not mentioned by Wallace and that needs to be ruled out before we can call regret a useful deliberative tool, namely social pressure. Like all our emotions, regret is subject to influencing factors like peer-pressure or social-norm-internalization. However, insofar as the undeniably malleable nature of emotions in general does not justify a complete disregard of all emotions, we have no reason to be so radical in our treatment of regret. We have reason to be cautious, and to try to distinguish between improper and authentic feelings of regret. No doubt, this is difficult in practice, but in theory it is clear that there is no alternative besides

assessing, developing and training our emotions such that they correspond with the reasons that we endorse and the values that we commit to.

When it comes to regret, one of the things that we need to be wary of are social norms imposed by stereotypes and expectations that we might not endorse if they were made explicit. The case of parenthood is a clear case at hand: childless women have to justify themselves (or at least offer an explanation) far more often than childless men. Hence, it should not be a surprise that women will feel guilty or regretful more often than men do when they remain childless. Indeed, research shows that pro-natalism, the belief that bearing children should be promoted, has negative effects on voluntarily and non-voluntarily childfree adults, especially women (see for example Park 2002; Mumtaz, Shahid, and Levay 2013). Conversely, it also means that mothers may be more prone to feelings of regret than fathers will be once they realize that they were attracted to motherhood by inauthentic factors. Greasly is, therefore, surely right to draw our attention to social pressure as something that may undermine the deliberative value of feelings of regret. Yet we think she is too radical in being suspicious of the deliberative value of regret overall. Moreover, she herself inadvertently reinforces a social norm that contributes to improper feelings of regret and guilt in women. Greasly endorses a manipulative stereotype herself by taking it for granted that mothers are unable to regret motherhood. She speaks about 'the inability to regret choosing motherhood' (2012, 711), as well as about 'the duty to celebrate and affirm the decision [to become a mother] in retrospect' (2012, 709). Both the psychological and moral claims are questionable. In fact, we think that it is both psychologically possible and morally permissible to regret motherhood (which is different from regretting that your child exists).

That it is psychologically possible to regret motherhood is an empirical fact. That it is morally permissible needs to be argued for, which we will not do here.[3] We simply want to point out that it should not be taken for granted that embracing motherhood is something that morality imposes on us. The empirical fact is established by testimonies of mothers who say that they regret becoming a mother. A recent study by the sociologist Orna Donath (2015) has studied maternal regret in 23 Israeli women and there have been mothers in Germany and the UK who have voiced their wish that they had remained childless.[4]Reading these testimonies, it is important to distinguish between two kinds of regret. The mothers all insist that they love their children. Their emotional life thus presupposes a difference between regretting that one's child exists and regretting that one has become a parent. Admittedly, the first may be psychologically impossible, and perhaps morally objectionable – although one can imagine extreme cases of serial killers or dictators whose parents are utterly appalled by the immoral character of the creature they put on this world. But overall, regretting the existence of a living individual seems a morally problematic attitude, especially if it is one's own responsibility that this individual

exists. However, the object of the second type of regret is not someone else's existence but the quality of one's own life. It does not seem morally wrong, nor uncommon, and certainly not psychologically impossible for people to regret what their lives have become. People make life choices that they might regret afterwards, and parenthood may be one of these choices.

As the possibility that one will regret motherhood is real, it can be helpful to think about the prospect of regret while deliberating about having a child. Greasly thinks of contexts in which the likelihood of regret is used manipulatively, by people who *assert* that one will regret it. But that is not the way in which our caring friend from the first case study, wanting to help her friend make a decision, invokes the possibility of regret. Does her suggestion to consider the possibility of regret need to be interpreted as manipulative? It seems to us that it need not, if the two choices are presented as equally worthy.[5] Orna Donath's study may be seen as a reminder of what happens when regret is invoked as a manipulative tool. The context of her study is important: in a pro-natalist society (as exemplified in a traditional Jewish community) it is expected that women will regret not becoming a mother. The study highlights powerfully that the use of regret as a heuristic tool in deciding whether to have a child should be non-coercive. The question whether one would regret not becoming a mother is only useful as a way to investigate one's own values if it is asked in a neutral way, as an invitation for further reflection.

Raising the possibility of regret, either proactively or retrospectively seems to cause suspicion in many cases: in Greasly's interpretation it can be seen as a suspect way of manipulating women into certain roles. A similar feeling is expressed in the reason why France's Conseil d'État (State Council) banned the 'Dear Future Mom' video from airing on French television.[6] We agree that the video is manipulative in that its explicit meaning is to encourage women (only future mothers are addressed, not fathers, which is another problem with the video) not to abort a foetus with trisomy-21. However, the context and background of this video is of course very specific: it is invoked by an increasingly common practice and social expectation that women will not give birth to a baby that was prenatally diagnosed with Down syndrome. The makers of the video wanted to fight one manipulative practice with another. Whether that is a prudent or wise strategy is something we will not discuss here. What we do want to draw attention to is the remarkable explanation of the ban by France's Conseil d'État in terms of concerns that the showing of happy children with Down syndrome in the video was 'inappropriate' because they were 'likely to disturb the conscience of women who had lawfully made different personal life choices'.[7] There are two readings of this statement: either the council thinks that women who regret the abortion later made a wrong choice, in which case it seem strange that one would want to spare these women the realization that they made a wrong choice – they are rational adults after all. Or the council thinks that regret invoked by the video does not reflect a wrong choice and should *therefore* be avoided. But why precisely are feelings of regret so bad that a state

must intervene to prevent citizens from having them? The answer is especially difficult when we assume that the regret does not reveal an unjustified choice. One can regret something while still (correctly) believing that one did, overall, the right thing. The message of the Conseil d'État seems to be that not only should people not use regret to inform decisions, but also that once the decisions are taken, it is imperative that any feelings of regret regarding them should be avoided as much as possible. This fear of regret seems unreasonable to us, and based on a false, one-sided idea of regret (perhaps emotions in general) as unreliable and manipulative while they very often, under the right circumstances, convey important information about what matters to us.

Summing up, we argue that, while a reference to regret may be used in a manipulative way, asking (oneself or someone else) whether one would regret a decision can very well be an honest invitation to reflect on one's values and expectations. In relation to our two case studies, it is important to keep in mind that regret over motherhood or parenthood is a real possibility, the prospect of which should at least inform one's decision.

3.3. Against the Inaccessibility-Argument

In her book *Transformative Experience*, Paul uses the examples of choosing to become a parent and choosing to become a vampire to demonstrate that it is impossible to rationally choose the right action on the basis of current knowledge or preferences. But are becoming a parent and becoming a vampire really on a par? Are they equally transformative in both the epistemic and personal sense? A transformative experience is *personally* transformative in that it changes one's core preferences. This might be true of becoming a vampire. But it is not obvious that becoming a parent also necessarily or always changes one's personality in a radical sense. It may be that becoming a parent reveals certain aspects of one's personality that were already there, or it resonates with known and unknown deep, core preferences that one has always had. Using heuristic tools such as pondering over the possibility of regret may reveal some of these characteristics. We will come back to the deliberative problem posed by personal transformation, but first we will examine whether *epistemic* transformation is really an obstacle to rational decision-making in the way Paul thinks it is.

Even if we grant that becoming a parent involves an epistemic transformation, one can wonder what it is exactly that one cannot know in advance. For example, Elizabeth Harman (2015) has argued, contra Paul, that one can approach the experience of parenthood by listening to or reading other people's testimonies about it. That does not tell you how it will be for you 'from the inside', but there are very few instances where we have that information. To some extent, you cannot know what something (anything!) will be like for you at time t1, until it happens to you at time t1. Admittedly, the likelihood that you know what drinking the next cup of tea will be like is higher than that you

know what becoming a parent is like, because in the former case you can fall back on ample personal experience. And so, admittedly, the decision whether to have children or not may be sufficiently different from other decisions one has to make, and so unique and personal, that standard decision-making heuristics are more difficult to apply. However, that does not make these heuristics inapplicable or entirely useless.

Nevertheless, someone might argue that the decision to have a child is so unlike any other decision that one has made that it is a *sui generis* decision, and that the deliberation proceeding this decision is therefore also *sui generis* and in no way comparable to standard decision-making processes.[8] Although we agree that the decision to have a child is an existential choice, whereas drinking a cup of tea is not, the differences between kinds of decisions seem gradual rather than categorical to us. Moreover, where we place a decision on the spectrum might differ between individuals. Imagine a woman who has been voluntarily helping her elder sister raising her nephews and nieces all her adolescent life. For her the decision to have children of her own might come naturally. Of course, she will realize it is a life-changing decision, and therefore different from having a cup of tea, but it is quite imaginable that she will not experience it as a particularly difficult or exceptional decision. Why would she? She has plenty of quasi-personal experience with what it is like to have children, she has no conflicting desires, and she knows what she wants. When someone asks her whether she might regret motherhood, she reflects on the question and in all honesty answers 'no'. She can apply the same heuristic devices as she would use in general, and although she most probably will see a difference in importance between the decision to have children and the decision to drink tea, she might not single out the former decision as *exceptionally* difficult or therefore exceptionally different from other decisions she made. The decision to go to university as the first woman in her family, might be far more *sui generis* to her than the decision to become a mother! For other people, in different circumstances, it would be the other way around. The relevant question for us is whether the *sui generis* character of a decision implies anything about the heuristic methods that can be used. We think that even for the woman being the first of her family to go to university, the question about future regret is useful, even if it only served the purpose of strengthening her resolution to go for it. This last point connects to a different worry we have with Paul's account and that has to do with what Paul thinks deliberation is about.

For Paul, deliberation is about assigning value to alternative choices based upon what one imagines future experience to be like. But in deciding which choice to make, future experiences may not always be what matters. Maybe making an informed choice is not solely about what the future brings for you, but is also about what kind of person you want to be, or, when a pregnancy is involved, what you think will be good for the child. In a commentary on Paul's book, John Campbell rightly questions Paul's way of framing the decision

whether or not to have a child as a decision that must be based on the subjective values of the experiences stemming from the choice. Paul's central argument is that it is impossible to know these subjective experiences, and therefore impossible to rationally decide in these matters anyway. But Campbell wonders why she works with this decision model to start with. He contrasts it with something a friend of his said about the decision to have children: 'I want to have children because my life has always been entirely centered on me, and I want to be forced to live in a different way' (Campbell 2015, 791). For this person, the decision to have a child was not based on the expected value of future experiences (and could hence not fail on the basis of ignorance about these experiences). Rather the decision was based on reflection about her identity, and about the things she was committed to or wanted to be committed to. Paul has replied to this criticism, but unconvincingly in our eyes.[9] She cannot deny that she regards reflection about one's future subjective life as basic to any rational deliberation strategy. This account of rational decision-making is presupposed by her theory about the doubly challenging nature of transformative decision-making. It is this foundational assumption that we, like Campbell, want to question. Our suggestion that reflection on regret has deliberative value may seem in line with Paul's focus on subjective experiences but in fact it is not. As we explained before, we consider the subjective state of regret to be a second-order phenomenon, supervening on facts and values and concerns that bear the real normative weight. We can be pluralists about reasons, and allow for both subjective experiences and objective evaluative facts as reasons being revealed by the feeling of regret. Deliberation on this picture is not about imagining what future experiences will be like but about deciding what kind of person one is or wants to be. Now, Paul might object that imagining feelings of regret can only track current preferences, values or conceptions of oneself. That is exactly the deliberative problem, she thinks, posed by personal transformation. If one's evaluative framework will be altered by the experience itself, it is irrelevant, she presumably would argue, that based on one's current evaluative framework one would regret a choice. But here we might pause and wonder what should guide and justify a decision: future experiences (which, admittedly, are hard or impossible to predict) or current preferences and value judgments? Although one cannot know whether one will or will not regret a decision, reflecting on whether one might regret it can help to reveal current values and preferences, and insofar as these should guide and justify decisions, imagining regret can help agents to understand what to do. Whether personal transformation hinders deliberation depends on what one thinks deliberation should be guided by. It seems very plausible to us that in particular important decisions and existential choices are decided by reflection about what kind of person one is, what kind of life one finds valuable, rather than by imagining how one would experience the future. Hence, we can save the heuristic value of regret from the problem posed by personal transformation.

That the future is inaccessible is a trivial truth and does not undermine (but rather is the *raison d'être* of) the usefulness of all deliberation processes. Presumably, Paul would agree with that. Yet she questions the use of imagination in deliberation on the basis of the transformative nature of the decision to be taken. We read her scepticism as emanating from either an unrealistic expectation of what deliberation is capable of or an exaggerated view of how different a person's future self may be. The message that we do take from Paul's concerns is that imagination is only useful insofar as it is informed. Imagining that one will regret motherhood or the absence of motherhood, while having a one-sided, naïve or idealized view of what motherhood involves, cannot possibly have deliberative value. For imagining whether one will regret something to be a useful heuristic tool, one must be informed about the circumstances one is imagining. Only when it is informed, the prospect of regret may reveal an authentic aspect of one's evaluative outlook.

3.4. Against the Misleading-Argument

As already transpires from our analysis of Paul's argument, at the background of this discussion are conflicting views about what deliberation is and what it can be expected to do. Our disagreement with Nanay's argument also reveals a different view of deliberation and rational decision-making. While Nanay does not lay out a full theory, he does equate rational decision-making with latching onto optimal outcomes. As our imagination can lead us away from, instead of towards, what is objectively speaking the optimal outcome, Nanay concludes that the use of imagination, such as imagining future regret, is not a rational way of making decisions. But is decision-making really a matter of latching onto optimal results? Is deliberation (say, about becoming a parent or about giving birth to a child with special needs) merely a process of discovering a fact that is established independently of the process of deliberation that one is going through? This view depicts deliberation as an exercise in detective-like discovery work, rather than in making up one's mind. Taken to its extreme, the view suggests that when a woman says, about whether or not to try to become pregnant, that *she does not know what she wants*, she means that there is some strong preference inside her but she cannot find it. This discovery-model of deliberation seems implausible to us. Much more likely is the interpretation that the woman in our example does not know what she wants in the sense that she cannot make up her mind. Indeed, we believe that making the right decision is not about latching onto the optimal outcome but about going through a process. Through deliberation, the right decision is *formed* rather than *discovered*. Imagining potential regret is part of this process, as it can shed light on one's values and expectations.

Another difference between the discovery-model and the formation-model of deliberation is the privileged standpoint of the first-person-deliberator.

Finding out what is objectively speaking the best result is a process that can in principle be undertaken by anyone who has epistemic access to the relevant information. But making up one's mind is something that can only be done first-personally. When the friend in our first case study asks what the woman would regret, it is important that the woman herself answers this question, no matter how well the friend knows her. Deliberating and deciding what course of action one will take is a matter of owning up to one's values and concerns, and of committing oneself to a particular turn the future will take.[10] Decisions, in other words, are not only end products but also starting points. Decisions are commitments, and as such they change the future. In our opinion it is quite possible that a pregnant woman who, after honest reflection on her values and expectations in life, decides to interrupt a pregnancy will not look back with regret while the same woman in a counterfactual situation where she goes along with the doctor's subtle (or not so subtle) recommendation does struggle with feelings of regret afterwards. The objective facts, about her desires and values and expectations and living conditions and such like, may be exactly the same, but her taking a stance one way or another makes all the difference. The point of deliberation is not to find out the best outcome but to make up one's mind. On this picture, the degree to which a decision is rational is more a function of the authenticity and self-knowledge with which a commitment is made than an objective or neutral assessment of the resulting outcome.

Summing up, the prospect of regret is not a misleading influence on deliberation if deliberation is thought of as a matter of owning up to one's own values and committing oneself to a course of action. Since regret (under the right circumstances) is an indication that one values something, imagining whether one will regret a decision is a way to get closer to what one values. It is unclear to what extent framing effects, order effects, circumstantial effects would prevent someone from being able to decide what he cares about.

4. How to Understand the Deliberative Value of (the Prospect of) Regret

While we are critical of the above objections against the deliberative use of regret, important lessons can be gleaned from them. For the prospect of regret to have real deliberative value, it should be arrived at (1) via reflection on one's values, (2) non-coercively, (3) when well-informed about factual circumstances and (4) in a process of self-commitment. Each of these four conditions is meant to capture a fair point of criticism revealed in the objections above. Let us recapitulate.

Against the irrelevance-argument, we hold that regret and the prospect of regret are relevant to deliberation if regret is understood as a second-order phenomenon that reveals underlying normative facts. Thus, the question whether one will regret something is a useful deliberative heuristic only if it is approached as a means to better understand one's values and concerns.

Against the manipulation-argument, we argued that the question 'Do you think you will regret (not) making this decision later?' need not be manipulative if it springs from the honest belief that the alternatives are equally valid, and that hence regret about either alternative would be possible and legitimate. This condition is not fulfilled when a ProLife Advocate tells a woman that she will probably regret one choice but not the other. He thereby does not help the woman to make up her own mind, but manipulates her in a certain direction. Reflection on the possibility of regret has deliberative value only if it is undertaken in a non-coercive context.

The inaccessibility-argument presupposes a rather demanding view of rational deliberation, which we are sceptical of. It may be true that choices can never be completely informed, but that does not mean no meaningful distinction can be made between rational and irrational or between well-informed and rash decisions. The question whether one will come to regret a certain decision might invite a certain amount of speculation (as the future is indeed inaccessible to us), but not more so than every other deliberative situation where all one has to go on are testimonies by other people and neutral information about objective facts. To enhance the deliberative usefulness of reflection on regret, we should indeed inform ourselves as best as we can. This information increases the chance that we have a realistic image of what future experiences will be like. But in the end, these experiences are not what matters, normatively speaking. What matters is what imagining them reveals to us. By imagining ourselves in the future situation, we use our emotional resources to get information about what we care about and what would be reasonable for us to do, given all the available information. The use of emotions in deliberation has been proven to be helpful, and even in some cases preferable to a calculating, logical approach to deliberations.[11] Like all other emotions, regret, if assessed and interpreted wisely, informs us about what we care about, and is in that sense an important heuristic device in deliberation.

The mentioned psychological studies that encourage us to rely on our gut instincts also speak against the misleading-argument. But as the empirical findings on the use of System 1 are mixed (see footnote 11), we rest our argument on a conceptual point: whether the use of imagination (and emotion, for that matter) misleads an agent depends on what one believes rational deliberation should lead to. Of course, we want rational deliberation to lead to a rational outcome, but whether it can be established what this outcome is without involving the agent's own reasoning towards a decision is an open question. We find the formation-model of deliberation more plausible than the discovery-model, and hence interpret reflection on the likelihood of regret as a useful means to make up one's mind about what to do.

If these four conditions are fulfilled, then the question 'will you regret it?' does not have to be interpreted as a manipulative trick to guide you in a certain direction, or an unreliable, misleading and possibly useless distraction. Even

if the conditions are fulfilled, it is still essential to interpret the role of regret in deliberation correctly. Thinking about regret is not a direct shortcut to a right decision. 'Will you regret it?' should be interpreted more as an encouragement to think about what matters most to you in life. Indeed, the values that reveal themselves in that reflective process are the actual and proper sources of reasons for action. As such, it is a heuristic device to help you decide what you care about, to endorse and compare values and to commit to a certain kind of life. But people care about many, sometimes incompatible things. Therefore, we also believe that it is perfectly possible to acknowledge that you will regret (certain aspects of) a decision, like aborting a foetus with a disability or becoming a parent at a young age, but still make that decision. Acknowledging the possibility of regret is an integral part of the decision process. As such, the prospect of regret does not offer decisive reason against a decision. Yet, it is still informative. For example, in the case of the decision to abort a foetus with a disability, pondering over whether you would regret this decision may make you realize that you do not have enough information to answer this question. Although, as Paul would argue, it is impossible to know for certain what it would be like to raise a child with a disability, reflecting on regret may be an impetus to try to seek further information and try to answer that question as accurately as possible. Moreover, it is useful to realize in advance: I might regret this decision, but that only means that pain is a part of life, not that my decision was a mistake.

In this respect, we find the description of agent regret by Carla Bagnoli (2000) useful. For her, agent regret is not just an unfortunate fact of life, but an important practical capacity. Regret should be interpreted as an acknowledgement that one did not choose a valuable alternative, and thus as a mode of valuing. This appreciation of paths not taken is the result of practical reasoning: of reconstructing one's past by reviewing one's reasons and realizing the constraints that bear on one's choices (either due to mistakes or to limiting circumstances). By analogy, we state that the prospect of regret is a sign of valuing, and of discovering one's values, and as such is a valuable part of a deliberative process.

5. Conclusion

Can the prospect of regret be informative when making certain life-changing decisions, such as deciding whether to continue a pregnancy of a child with a disability or whether to become a parent? We have argued, starting from the assumption that such decisions are best answered by personal deliberation rather than by applying certain abstract principles, that indeed, a non-coercive reflection on the possibility of regretting a decision is a useful component in a deliberative process. There are certain conditions that need to be fulfilled, though. First, it should be an instance of informed regret, not a preference based on ignorance. Also, the invitation to think about the likelihood of regret

should be seen as an invitation to think about one's values and preferences, one's wishes and expectations: who am I and who do I want to be? And perhaps most importantly, the reflection should be free from improper influences on regret, such as social pressure. If these conditions are fulfilled, and the process of making up one's mind is set in motion, then reflection on the question of what one will regret may be a helpful heuristic device to get in touch with one's deepest concerns that give reasons to act in a particular way. The common practice of asking ourselves or each other whether we would regret a certain decision survives the philosophical objections to doing so.

Notes

1. In later writings on the role of imaginative empathy in deliberation, Paul even goes further and suggests that it is not only impossible (and hence useless to try) to imagine what it would be like to have a child (or undergo another transformative experience) but also that it would be alienating and corrupting to try to imagine this while going through the deliberation process. It can be very rational not to want to engage in imaginative empathy, Paul thinks, because the imaginative act may change you and alienate you from your current preferences. Thus the epistemic device of imaginative empathy can turn into a personal change *before* one decided what one wants. On this line of thinking, Paul would explicitly advise our two women in the case studies *not* to imagine whether they would regret a choice in five years' time because the imaginative act may have a corruptive, alienating effect and be detrimental to the decision-making.
2. Williams is careful not to say that the retrospective affirmation makes the decision morally justified. Gauguin only achieves *rational* justification for his decision. (In light of this, one might find the notion moral luck a bit misleading. What depends on fortune for Gauguin, is not whether his decision will be *morally* justified. In fact, we think that Williams would agree that Gauguin's decision remains a cruel one and is an immoral decision, even if it was justified overall. Gauguin is subject to *justification luck* only.)
3. See, however, Protasi (forthcoming).
4. See, for example, this article in *The Guardian*: Marsh 2017.
5. Of course, this begs the question whether a more persuasive suggestion to at least consider regret is ever allowed. For example, if we talk to Parfit's 14-year-old girl who desperately wants to become a mother as soon as possible, is our 'would you not regret becoming a mother so early on (and foregoing an education for example)?' an honest invitation for reflection on her values or an attempt at manipulation? There is a fine line. But even in the case of this girl whose reflexive autonomy might not be fully developed yet, one stands a better chance of having a helpful conversation if one is honest without secret manipulation.
6. One can watch the video online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ju-q4OnBtNU
7. One can find the Counsel's statements quoted on many websites, tellingly almost all conservative news websites or card-carrying ProLife websites. It is a sign of our time that this debate is not taken up in mainstream media. See for example LifeNews.com: Metaxas and Rivera 2017.
8. We thank an anonymous referee for pressing us on this point.

9. In her reply to Campbell, Paul (2015c) points out that she never intended subjective values to be understood in an internalist or phenomenological sense. She concedes that 'the subjective value of a lived experience is not merely a matter of the phenomenal character of the internal characteristics of one's inner life [and that] it encompasses the value of what it's like to live in a particular set of circumstances, where those circumstances may include the external environment' (2015c, 807) but repeats that nevertheless imagination is needed to grasp the subjective value of a possible future experience.
10. We are indebted to Richard Moran's (2001) defence of the avowal-theory of self-knowledge against the introspective model.
11. There is a lively debate in psychology on the usefulness of two systems in the mind, the 'quick and dirty' System 1 and the slower, deliberative System 2. One study that provides evidence that in some circumstances relying on our gut instinct is a better way to make rational decisions is Dijksterhuis 2006.

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